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ABSTRACT

Present day right wing attacks on schools and the back to basics movement are in many ways similar to the criticisms made during the McCarthy era of 1949-54, neither movement offering any novel solutions to educational or social problems. Allen A. Zoll and the National Council on American Education provided much rhetoric on constitutional rights and collectivism and their incompatibility, and much literature was published on these subjects. The National Education Association responded to these forces and attempted to refute the charges concerning the corruption of the schools; it is clear that if charges are not met with refutations they become very plausible for the public. The lesson of history in the light of present day criticism is that educators must continually attempt to understand and cope with the numerous criticisms lodged against the schools if they wish to maintain a level of equilibrium in the schools. (DS)

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THUNDER ON THE RIGHT:

PAST AND PRESENT

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Criticism has long been a part of the American educational tradition and all school systems, large or small, rural and urban, have and are faced with criticism from day to day. The period 1949 to 1954 was no acception to this fact, and from this period of transition in American life a number of interesting parallels to today's "Crisis in the Schools" can be found."[1]

To begin, the basic allegations being made by today's critics appear and are quite similar to those earlier criticisms. For instance, the current charges of obscenity, immorality, godlessness, and/or otherwise subversive nature in our schools' textbooks indicates a pattern not unlike those activities of right wing individuals and organizations during the late 1940's and early 1950's. Other similarities between earlier critics and present day criticisms can be found in the quality of books being read by the pupil, the prevalence of comic books as reading matter of our younger generation, corruption in Washington, athletic scandals, the high crime rate, the divorce situation, Communism in government, and most importantly the poor intellectual quality of secondary and college students.

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Unhappily the period of 1949 to 1954, sometimes labeled the McCarthy era, was for those Americans who lived through it a time of deep frustration. The United States and the Soviet Union were becoming locked in their now classic stalemate. Colonialism was disappearing and new world economic groupings were constantly in the process of being formed. Add to this new developments in weaponry which were rendering traditional modes of enforcing national policy altogether obsolete. These, of course, were but a few of the most obvious conditions that existed in America's relations with the world outside which served to frustrate American aims and ambitions, and without a doubt continue to frustrate us today.

At home in the late 1940's and early 1950's the frustrations and anxieties of such things as race relations, economic threats, urbanization, and industrialization were creating an atmosphere of continuing tension and fear. Add to this the fact that one war was hardly ended before American troops were engaged in a bloody struggle in Korea, to be followed by a prolonged period of "cold war" which produced a harrowing sense of strain and anxiety for the American people.

Public disaffection and frustration during this era of anxiety was made evident by a sudden proliferation of societies, leagues, committees, councils, and crusades which proposed to stop the clock of social change--or to turn its hands back to some easier time when men could move more readily and directly to achieve what they wanted.

In comparison, the tensions and anxieties within the United States of the 1970's are not so different from the 1949-1954 period. We're not faced with famine or even a decline in living standards, but rather on an ever-present lowering of the quality of life. The costs of American population growth are traffic jams, spreading urban and suburban blight, the pressures

of overcrowding and destruction of beaches and parks, water shortages, air and environmental pollution, and the deterioration in professional and social services resulting from shortages of trained personnel. It is obviously a frustrating world that our young people face today with increasing alienation. Automation and technical innovations have brought greater abundance, more leisure, and a clearer awareness, through mass media, of the stark contrast between affluence and poverty. Poised between the triumphs of the past and the inscrutable ordeal ahead those current social critics are again calling for a return to the basics and that "lost" earlier and simpler society.

The Right Wing Critics of Education

Criticisms of the period 1949-1954 differed from those of the past, mainly in volume, intensity, and to some extent in emphasis. The critic's charges that public education was undermining the American form of a democratic government and encouraging some type of subversive organization was more prevalent than ever before.[2] Opponents of public education in the late 1940's and early 1950's were more active and bolder than they had been at any other time in recent history.

These individuals and groups have sometimes been referred to as the "Radical Right."[3] But the fact is that there was nothing radical about them. They offered no novel solutions to the problems that plagued our schools; indeed, they offered no solutions at all. They were merely immensely discontented with things as they were and furiously impatient with almost everyone whom they thought could be held responsible for their frustrations, namely educators and the public schools.

These right wing critics were described by Benjamin Fine in an article entitled "Educators Warned of War on Schools."[4] In that article Dr. Harold Benjamin was described as relating to the National Education Association that "taxpayer groups and superpatriotic organizations were in large part responsible for the anti-public school drive."[5] Dr. Benjamin said that these anti-school groups assumed many disguises to make a layman confuse them with the National Education Association, the American Council on Education, and other reputable organizations. Dr. Benjamin went on to state that:

> Sometimes he (the right wing critic) dresses in the fancy uniforms of that superpatriotism of which truly patriotic groups have long since learned to beware. Sometimes this enemey drapes himself in the mantle of religious orthodoxy, breathing pious expressions of opposition to sin along with his lies about public education, . . (This "enemy" of education) attempts to link public schools with "godlessness" or with "progressive education." . . . To undermine the schools this "enemy" charges that present-day education spreads atheism or increased juvenile delinquency.[6]

Attacks and criticims of our schools during the McCarthy era particularly of the secondary schools, became a favorite indoor pasttime. In books, magazines, and newspapers the school was held-up to ridicule and scorn. From full-dress book critiques, such as John T. Flynn's The Road Ahead, Frederick Rand Rogers' Treason in American Education, or Dr. E. Merrill Root's Brainwashing in the High Schools, to more frequent but no less pretentious satires in periodicals and pamphlets such as Allen Zoll's They Want Your Child, Irene C. Kuhn's article "Your Child is Their Target," and Frank Chodorov's A Fifty-Year Project To Combat Socialism On The Campus, the schools were the target of the critics.[7] The radio, the theater, the screen, the public platform, and the press, were the media for the complaints by critics of the schools.

Allen A. Zoll and The National Council for American Education

Operating under respectable sounding slogans, the "patriots" of the McCarthy era came forward with proposals to restore our Constitutional rights, keep the"Reds" out of our schools, eliminate textbooks slanted toward Collectivism, and above all abolish progressive education.

One such "patriot" was Allen Alderson Zoll who was credited with, (and who credited his writings to), having influenced the course of events. The January, 1951 issue of the Nation's Schools described Allen Zoll and his National Council for American Education (NCAE) as:

> Slogan: "Devoted to the stimulation of sound education and the eradication of Marxism and Collectivism from our schools national life."
>
> Publishes: Educational Guardian. Issues pamphlets "exposing" Communist teachers and Communist teachings in schools and colleges. Red-ucators at Harvard University Progressive Education Increases Delinquency, etc.
>
> Allen A. Zoll, Executive Vice-President.[8]

The National Council for American Education stated in a number of its publications that it was "the only organization in America specifically and exclusively opposing, on a national basis subversive influences in schools and colleges." And that anyone sharing these "objectives," is "cordially invited to join this active, militant organization--the National Council for American Education--and help keep America's Schools American."[9] To fulfill these and other objectives the NCAE published pamphlets with the following titles: Progressive Education Increases Delinquency; Academic Freedom; The Yale Whitewash; They Want Your Child; Socialism is Stupid; Red-ucators at Harvard; A Fifty-Year Project to Combat Socialism on the Campus; Should Americans Be Against World Government?; Awake, America, Awake, and Pray!; How Red Are The Schools?; Harvard Red Hunting Ground; and Harvard Crimson Harvard.

Publications such as the above were written, as Archibald W. Anderson observed in 1952, by right wing critics with charges against modern schooling such as:

1. The schools are neglecting the fundamentals.
2. The schools have abandoned the time-tested methods of drill and recitation and have substituted inefficient and easy methods.
3. Work has been taken out of school.
4. The schools have abandoned discipline.
5. There are too many "fads and frills."
6. The schools are wasting time on inconsequential subjects, especially in the social studies.
7. The schools are dealing with controversial issues and leading the young toward "socialism."
8. The schools are not doing a good job of preparing young people for college.
9. Young people who attempt to enter the business world cannot hold a job because they cannot read, write, spell, or do arithmetic.[10]

Thus the NCAE, through the pen of Allen Zoll and others, based most of its assumptions on the premise that renowned educators such as John Dewey and George Counts were advocating a godless materialistic philosophy. The syllogism appears to have run something like this: Since the schools are Godless, they lack moral and spiritual values; since they lack moral and spiritual values; juvenile delinquency increases; hence progressive educators increase delinquency. Add to this an equally strong attack by the Zollites to "stamp out" progressive education on the grounds that it was a Marxist attempt to subvert the schools and it's little wonder that right wing critics such as the NCAE and Allen Zoll were able to affect educational criticism everywhere.

NEA Responds To The Critics

As educators persistently sought to refute the charges of their critics, specific criticisms were met by the leading educational organizations of the day in various ways.

The NEA did several things during the 1940's to suggest an awareness that trouble was brewing. In 1941, for example, the NEA had established its National Commission for the Defense of Democracy Through Education, noting "various organizations have become active . . . attempting to create a distrust of the efficiency of the public schools and of the loyalty of the teaching profession. This must be met . . . ."[11] In 1949 the Commission held a conference to consider the attacks on education, and similar conferences were convened in 1950 and 1951.

The February, 1950, issue of the NEA Journal noted the 1949 conference and the creation of the Donald Du Shane Memorial Defense Fund, in honor of Donald Du Shane. An editorial in the Journal made the following comments about the new Defense Fund:

> The Donald Du Shane Memorial Defense Fund is intended to provide aid to worthy educators (administrators and classroom teachers from the kindergarten thru the university) who have been unjustly treated . . . The Defense Fund was authorized by the 1949 Representative Assembly on a motion introduced by Sara Caldwell, . . . The motion read:
>
> "I move that a campaign be carried on to increase the amount in the Defense Fund in order to assure that necessary financial assistance may be given the members of the profession who have been unjustly treated and whose cases are important to the welfare of the profession."[12]

As criticisms of many school systems began to differ in kind, amount, and intensity, so did the varieties of response. The NEA through its National Commission for the Defense of Democracy thru Education began an all-out campaign to identify, describe, and refute the national forces behind the attacks on education. Robert A. Skaife, the field secretary for the Commission, prepared five articles, "They Sow Distrust," "They Oppose Progress," "They Want Tailored Schools," "Congressional Probes into Education," and "The Conflict

Continues," all published in the Nation's Schools. They revealed the background, methods, connections, and associations of some of the more well known individuals and organizations attacking American schools in the late 1940's and early 1950's. Skaife, in these and other articles, attempted to show how the unproven charges by certain critics of the day were on the "smear variety."[13]

The right wing attacks during the period 1949 to 1954 demonstrated a tendency to snowball, gathering strength and momentum as each critic gained adherents for his point of view. But of equal importance is being aware of the frequent absence of response by educators to the criticisms being made. Insofar as what lessons of history may provide insight into the past, it has become apparent that unless the protests or demands of a critic of the late 1940's or early 1950's were answered--or at least faced in some way--he could eventually persuade people within a community to bring extensive changes to its schools.

Modern Right Wing Criticisms

During the last few years, the American public schools have once again become the storm center of controversy. Magazines, journals, and national and local newspapers are all devoting considerable space to the discussion of educational issues.

Current criticisms differ from those of the past, mainly in volume, intensity, and to some extent in emphasis. The charge that today's education is undermining our form of democratic government and encouraging some type of socialistic organization was presumably more prevalent during the 1949-1954 period than today, however, it is not totally absent in today's

criticisms. Critics of public education are more active and bolder than they have been at any other time in recent history, for instance the "back to basics" proponents and the Kanawha County, West Virginia textbook censors. Both groups have demonstrated that they sincerely believe that public education is the cause of every social ill which has ever befallen mar, and that education, the universal panacea, has failed to work its miracles. Yet the modern critic of today tenaciously clings to the vision of education as a cure-all.

U.S. News and World Report points out that with the continued use of public disaffection in the nation's educational product an ever-increasing resentment is being directed toward "soaring costs; the spread of drugs and disorders among students--even preadolescents;" seeminngly lower academic achievement' "and the feeling of many parents that they are being ignored in basic decisions on such issues as busing, textbook content, and classroom permissiveness."[14]

Stung by criticisms, some educators and schools are discarding innovations in favor of traditional goals and techniques. As a result, educators are finding themselves caught up in a chaotic swirl of pressures and trends.

The profession and the public of today share the common problem of quickly identifying those groups which assume an educational pose, but which in reality are only facades behind which forces may hide. Where this is not done, a community may find that its local problem is obscured in the sound and fury caused by the intemperate charges national propaganda groups hurl so freely. Our hope then, with a note of caution to past experiences with right wing criticisms of education, is that we educators will continually attempt to understand and cope with the numerous criticisms lodged against our schools.

Footnotes

[1]Special Section, "Crisis in the Schools," U.S. News and World Report, September 1, 1975. pp. 45-56. Cover Story, "High Schools Under Fire," Time Magazine, November 14, 1977. pp. 62-75.

[2]Elwood P. Cubberly, Public Education in the United States, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., revised ed., 1954), p. 160.

[3]Alan Barth, "Report on the 'Rampageous Right.'" The New York Times Magazine, November 26, 1961. p. 25, col. 4.

[4]Benjamin Fine, "Educators Warned of War on Schools," New York Times, July 4, 1950. p. 28, col. 7.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid.

[7]John T. Flynn, The Road Ahead, America's Creeping Revolution, New York: The Devin-Adair Co., 1949. Edward Merrill Root, Brainwashing in the High School, New York: Devin-Adair Company, 1958. Frederick Rand Rogers, Treason in American Education: A Case History, New York: Pleiades Publications, 1949. Frank Chodorov, A Fifty Year Project to Combat Socialism on the Campus. Monographs and Papers by the National Council for American Education, New York: 1952. Irene Corbally Kuhn, "Your Child Is Their Target," American Legion Magazine, (July, 1952), pp. 18-19, 53-60. Allen A. Zoll, They Want Your Child, Monographs and papers by the National Council for American Education, New York: 1949.

[8]Robert A. Skaife, "They Sow Distrust," The Nation's Schools, XLVII, No. 1, January, 1951. p. 29.

[9]Allen A. Zoll. They Want Your Child, a Pamphlet by the National Council for American Education, (New York: Published by the Council, 1950), p. 23.

[10]Archibald W. Anderson, "The Charges Against American Education: What Is The Evidence?" Progressive Education, January, 1952. pp. 91-105.

[11]"Proposed National Commission on the Defense of Democracy Through Education," National Education Association Address and Proceedings, 79, (Washington: the Association, 1941), p. 778.

[12]Editorial, "The Donald Du Shane Memorial Defense Fund," NEA Journal, 39, February, 1950. p. 123.

[13]Robert A. Skaife, "The Conflict Continues," Nation's Schools, 53, No. 3, March, 1954, p. 48.

[14]Special Section, "Crisis in the Schools," p. 42.